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ABSTRACT

Focus groups with Hmong American undergraduates examined their educational experiences in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Over 25 years after the first Hmong refugees arrived, cultural difference is still used to explain the status of Hmong communities. Hmong children are said to be excelling in school, though reports do not consider the high numbers of limited English proficient Hmong students who cannot take standardized tests. Hmong American students are often caught between many competing images of who they are and what their history is about. Profound cultural differences of neo-racism are often used to explain their educational experiences. They are constructed as being American in name but not possessing the cultural qualities needed to truly succeed as Americans. Students reported that their parents considered any departure from Hmong tradition a step toward delinquency. They noted that many of their teachers and administrators had little knowledge of Hmong culture or history, and they felt an extreme disconnect between home and school. Race was a central influence upon their schooling. Hmong American paraprofessionals were sometimes hired to further communication with parents and students, but students considered them ineffective. Maneuvering the borders of race, culture, class, and citizenship left these students feeling confused and often alone. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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FAMILIAR FOREIGN: HMONG AMERICAN STUDENTS ENGAGING AND RESISTING AMERICA

Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association

Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL

April 21-25, 2003

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When asked what the term "American" means to him, Kou replied:

...it's white. It's not the, that's why the typical American should be like, everybody, everyone. That's what I feel like it should be. But, you know, it took me a long time to figure that out, you know. But I'm just saying, in the minds of the Hmong community, you know, and I'm confident when I say this, speaking for them, because I talk to them on a daily basis and, you know, when we do workshops and conferences, we discuss it. And most of them, if not all of them, think like that. And we're saying that, nowadays, we can't just think like that. We gotta think in terms of, we, we...even when we refer to ourselves as Americans, we refer to ourselves as Hmong Americans. But when you say the word 'American,' you don't think of a Hmong person being a U.S. citizen, or other ethnic or racial, ah, groups. You think of white people being American. That's just how it is.

Introduction

In order to talk about my work, I first have to state that I would not be able to do it unless Hmong American students were denied the educational opportunities that I receive. What I mean is, there is no way that the Hmong American undergraduate students I work with should have to depend on me, a white female doctoral student, to provide academic credibility to their struggles to advocate for the Hmong American community. But the reality is that they usually are not considered authoritative, or even listened to, when discussing their own community. Their invisibility as student researchers and activists mirrors the ways in which the Hmong American community is rendered invisible by mainstream white society – through white ignorance of who Hmong people are or why they are in the United States (Chan, 1994), through welfare reform that does not take into account refugee status or limited English proficiency of recipients (Moore & Selkowe, 1999), through an absence of teacher education that would produce teachers capable of providing culturally relevant education to Hmong American students (Gay, 2000), and through the assumption that Hmong Americans are foreign and therefore not as "American" as other Americans (Wu, 2002).

The six Hmong American undergraduate students with whom I work – five women and one man - actively contest the ways in which their educational experiences have tried to make

them disappear. As a former student at their university and also a former tutor to many of them, they knew me as someone who had been politically active on campus and was committed to advocating for Hmong American students. We came together in a focus group last spring, and have been meeting sporadically ever since in order to further pursue our research. Our goal is to examine the educational experiences of Hmong American students in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and to build a body of research that would prove useful to working with the La Crosse School District in order to implement meaningful changes for Hmong American students.

History of Hmong Americans in La Crosse

Hmong people first began to move into La Crosse in the late 1970s and early 1980s, sponsored for relocation from Thai refugee camps by local religious organizations such as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services and the United States Catholic Conference (Tanabe, Rochon, Root, & Root, 2001). Not all families arrived because of religious organizations, however. Many more resettled in Wisconsin from other American cities through secondary migration, searching for better social services and reunification with family and clan members (Mattison, Lo, & Scarseth, 1994).

When Hmong refugees first arrived, many Wisconsin social service agencies and schools were unprepared to meet their needs. There were few (if any) social workers (Moore & Selkowe, 1999) or teachers (Tanabe et. al, 2001), for example, who spoke Hmong or had any familiarity with Hmong culture. During this period, many of the problems faced by the Hmong community were explained through theories of cultural adjustment or adaptation. The Hmong were described as a "preliterate" society that was completely unfamiliar with modern life, thereby advancing explanations of cultural inferiority while ignoring the material conditions that contributed to the difficulties of Hmong families, such as inadequate social services, limited access to adult education or child care, and the trauma and violence many Hmong people experienced as

refugees. Instead, American descriptions of Hmong culture most often fell back on racialized stereotypes of a primitive people with a fixed and unchanging culture (Lee, 2001).

Over twenty-five years after the first Hmong refugees arrived in Wisconsin, cultural difference is still used as an explanation for the status of Hmong communities and of Hmong children (Koltyk, 1998). However, Hmong culture is now described as having strong family and educational values and possessing a propensity for hard work, along with the older ideas about Hmong primitivism (Hutchison, 1997; Koltyk, 1998). Hmong children are said to be excelling in Wisconsin schools, achieving higher than even white students in the state (Hutchison, 1997; Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1998), a glowing report that fails to explore the high numbers of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Hmong American students who are prevented from taking standardized tests (Tanabe et. al, 2001). At the same time that the Hmong American version of the "Model Minority" is being advanced, there has been increasing media coverage of Hmong adolescents as gang members or criminals. These "delinquents" (Lee, 2001) or "gangsters" have been described as too Americanized, as children who have lost touch with the values of their Hmong culture (Hopgood, 1999; McBride, 1999; Ingersoll, 1999).

Given the high rates of poverty among families of Hmong descent and the adverse effect that Wisconsin's welfare reform plan (W-2) has had on Hmong families (Moore & Selkowe, 1999), as well as ESL courses that have few, if any, teachers who are bilingual in Hmong (Tanabe et. al, 2001), it seems reasonable to look for answers that do not attribute educational issues facing Hmong American youth today to Hmong cultural primitivism, a Hmong American version of the "Model Minority," or the over-Americanization of Hmong American youth.

Border Theory and Hmong American Students

Hmong American students are often caught between many competing images of who they are, who their families are, and what their history is supposed to be about. It becomes confusing, difficult to know how to negotiate so many borders and contested spaces. Border theory (Anzaldua, 1987/1999) becomes a way to describe the struggles of Hmong American students maneuvering between white school expectations and those of their families and communities; between the constant rearticulations and adaptations of Hmong American culture and mainstream American society. Traditional framing of race in America does not provide spaces for these discussions; instead, race is conceived of as a series of oppositional binaries. Border theory challenges this rather simplistic definition of race, arguing for the fluidity and hybridity between and within cultures, between identities, and within relations of power. For these Hmong American students, then, counternarratives (Delgado 1995) about Hmong American border crossings challenge dominant discourses of legitimate or objective knowledge that position them as objects rather than as agents. Their stories work to make Hmong American experiences visible, rather than subsumed beneath white American interpretations of what it is to be Hmong American (Chang, 2000).

Who is American?

For weeks after September 11th, 2001, I saw TV commercials showing people of different ages, sexes, and ethnicities stating "I am an American." It occurred to me, however, that if their Americanness were really uncontested, there would have been no need for such advertising. But historically in the United States, citizenship and whiteness have been conflated to such an extent that people of color in the U.S. *do* continue to have their American-ness contested. The commercials, in attempting to forge national unity around patriotism and perceived shared injury, were redrawing the lines of who is and is not an American through an

invocation of diversity. The contested nature of American-ness was not critiqued, but rather enforced by the commercials, because using people of many ethnic backgrounds served to obscure the radically disparate social, economic, historical and political positions these different people occupy within the U.S. Implying that race doesn't matter because "we are all Americans," the commercials relied on neo-racist (Balibar, 1991) discourse, which rearticulates race as profound cultural difference rather than biology. These profound cultural differences are then held up as the reason why segregated neighborhoods exist, why some people are trapped in cycles of poverty, or why some children are not graduating from school.

The profound cultural differences of neo-racism are often used to explain the educational experiences of Hmong American students. Occupying contested and racialized spaces of who really is American, Asian Americans have long been stereotyped as 'forever foreign' (Wu, 2002), and Hmong Americans are no exception. However, perceptions of Hmong American foreignness are often mediated not by Orientalist (Said, 1981/1997) fascination with an ancient and rich Asian culture, but rather an assumption of Hmong primitivism and fierce independence. "Model Minority" stereotypes, when applied to Hmong American students, usually involve stories of Hmong American students who overcome rigid traditional Hmong culture in order to succeed – home culture in this instance is not a strength that Asian American students draw upon for educational success (Coleman, 2002). Constructs of Hmong American foreignness, then, are similar to those imposed upon African Americans – people who are American in name, but do not possess the cultural qualities necessary for them to truly succeed as Americans.

Like African Americans, Hmong Americans' foreignness positions them outside the social compact that binds mainstream (i.e. white) Americans together. In other words, their constructed foreignness is a mark of inferiority, an assertion that Hmong Americans do not have a culture as valuable as that of mainstream white America. As Aihwa Ong (1999) explains,

.... white-black polarities emerging out of the history of European-American imperialism continue to shape attitudes and encode the discourses directed at immigrants from the rest of the world that are associated with racial and cultural inferiority. This dynamic of racial othering emerges in a range of mechanisms that variously subject non-white immigrants to whitening or blackening processes that indicate the degree of their closeness to or distance from ideal white standards. (287)

Hmong Americans are "blackened" to the extent that they are positioned far from "ideal white standards," and closer to African Americans within American discourses of race. Like African Americans, Hmong Americans are called welfare dependent; Hmong American women are considered to have too many children and to give birth at too young an age; and Hmong American youth who are "too Americanized" and adopt aspects of hip hop culture are called "gangsters" or juvenile delinquents (Lee, 2001).

The students I work with describe their parents as very fearful of their children becoming "gangsters," and often interpret any departure from Hmong tradition as a step down the road to delinquency. In particular, Hmong American parents point to Hmong American youth who dress in popular styles as gangsters, especially those who wear baggy pants or other clothing imitative of hip hop cultural styles. "Gangster," then, is more than delinquent or criminal behavior; it is resistance to Hmong American parental standards as well as modeling of clothing and behavior stereotypically labeled African American. In this sense, Hmong American parents who strictly police their children's behavior for signs of being a "gangster" could be interpreted as policing borders that venture too close to blackness. However, this is an area that requires further research.

White Teachers

According to the Hmong American students I work with, many of the teachers and school administrators they interacted with during their k-12 experiences had little knowledge of Hmong culture or history. Most of these teachers were white; in fact, only one of the respondents could recall having interacted with any teacher of color during her entire k-12 schooling, and he was an

art teacher she saw during a semester in high school. While the teachers are predominantly white in La Crosse, the student body is about 15% Hmong American and growing (Tanabe et. al, 2001). In part because of the lack of Hmong American teachers in the district, the Hmong American students who participated in the study experienced an extreme disconnect between school and home values, mostly because they felt that school personnel did not bother to find out how to meet their needs.

Kou, for instance, felt the school could have done much more:

Well, I felt like there coulda been help in terms of resource or people that understand *me*, perhaps. Uhh, I just didn't think there was enough resource there to help me in terms of anybody or, or people who were knowledgeable of me or who understood me, who I could go to. Umm, the counselors, I didn't feel like I could connect with or could connect with me, and they didn't seem like they, uh, cared as much. I didn't get a chance to go see them a lot, so…I just felt like, the school coulda done more, and I'm not sure why I feel this way, but you know, the school could've done more. I'm not sure whether, if they offered any bilingual class would help or if they hired a, teachers who would understand my culture or my historical background or just me. Because growing up in this mainstream society itself is hard enough for me to figure things out, and at the time I didn't have things figured out, you know, as much as I have them figured out right now. Still not a lot, but….It would have helped if there would've been someone who understood at least the process of first generation or second generation refugees or immigrants, you know, what the experience is like and what we're going through and stuff like that….

Pa specifically names teachers as people who didn't understand her, and who did not affirm her as a Hmong American student:

I think a lot of it has to do with the teachers not understanding, like, where the students are coming from. I mean, they just expect to treat the Hmong students like white students. And, well, first of all, they're not white students, so their mentality is not like white students, you know? And their psychology and everything about them is not white. And the white teachers are there to teach them about white things. And then, you know, they don't like that, and then, you know, the parents at home don't understand them because their culture is totally different, you know. And the two conflict with one another. I mean, you have a school, you know, their teacher telling them one thing and they're going home and their parents telling them another thing. And they're just confused. They don't know where to go from there and, like, who should they listen to – their teacher or their parents? And sometimes they're torn between the two.

In much of the literature on Hmong American students, researchers discuss culture but fail to investigate the impact of race, class, or citizenship on Hmong American student experiences

(Lee, 2001). Within the responses of the La Crosse Hmong American students, however, they clearly name race as a central influence upon their schooling. Furthermore, they point to their teachers' whiteness as a reason why teachers underserved them or attempted to render them invisible. Kou recalls:

I had a friend who, when we were seniors....we must have just had the senior syndrome where we don't want to do anything. We wanted to just lay back and graduate and get out of there. So, you know, he's, he's always been a so-called good student because he's a senior and he's getting through school and stuff like that. But towards the end, he was getting lazy and stuff like that. So, for two days in a row he woke up late towards his morning class, so this one morning he woke up late, and he was having an exam in his class. But he was like fifteen minutes late or so. So he walked in class and the professor was like, "Go get an excuse from the attendance office." So he goes and gets an excuse. He comes back and then the teacher gets all mad that they excused him. So the teacher took him down to the guidance office and demanded that they unexcuse him. So they did, they, they like signed it off saying that, okay, you're unexcused. So, and then the teacher goes, "You get zero for the exam because you were unexcused." You know, and he just....It's just small stuff like that that, it seems like, you know, we're having a hard time already, and there's not enough teachers that care or, you know, it seems like they're part of the problem or they're making it harder than it already is, you know? ... makes me and my friends feel like, okay, you know, it's us against them. It's us against the school. Or it's us against the teachers. Or it's us against the, either white students or the others. You know, like going through school you always have that feeling. Every single day. It's me against them, you know? That cultural component comes into play. My parents don't understand me, these people don't understand me – it's me against, you know, the system....it's, you know, you just don't feel a part of it. You know, it seems like the slope that you're climbing just gets steeper and steeper. You can't.....you know, every day.....Things, subtle things that the teacher and the students do, like, the other students, the Caucasian students do to you or, you know, just makes you feel less and less a part of the school. Or like, you just feel like you don't care anymore. You don't want to care, you know?

The constant racism Kou experienced from white teachers and students made him disconnect from school in self-defense. This daily racism, in addition to the tensions between him and his parents and his ongoing struggles to negotiate cultural borders, alienated him and made him feel outside the school community.

While most of the students in the group spoke of white teachers who were racist, they also mentioned a few individual teachers who demonstrated care and worked with Hmong American students. But as Blia and Say state, it was usually only one or two individual teachers

who worked with the Hmong students in extracurricular activities through their own initiative, helping to form a multicultural club or put on a presentation during diversity week. The point of the students' critique is that teacher neglect of Hmong American culture was institutional; while helpful to them personally at times, the attention of one or two white teachers did not meaningfully interrupt that institutional neglect.

Hmong American Paraprofessionals and Interpreters

Hmong American paraprofessionals are sometimes hired in the schools in order to further communication with Hmong American parents and students. Part of the reason these paraprofessionals are there is to relate to Hmong American students and to increase communication between Hmong families and the school (Tanabe et. al, 2001). However, these paraprofessionals do not have the power of the certified teacher in whose classroom they work. Furthermore, paraprofessionals are often much older than the students, with different experiences in terms of how they came to the U.S. and how they have negotiated mainstream American culture. Therefore, the paraprofessionals are often viewed by students more as authority figures than as people they can relate to. At the same time, having a Hmong American educator in the classroom was helpful to students who were struggling with English. But as Kou says, having Hmong American paraprofessionals as the institutional answer to Hmong American student difficulties proved inadequate:

Two of my…the end of my high school years they hired a Hmong…what was it called? Teacher aide? Basically it was an interpreter, umm, but the thing was, the interpreter was somewhat older and, it seemed like an authority figure to me and a lot of the students my age. So it's not like it's someone who we can connect with. And…but that person was useful in terms of interpreting things to those other students that were newly arrivals to the country, and communicating between the parents and the students, but it seemed like those individuals didn't have a grasp of the mainstream structure or system…school system, you know, because they lacked that knowledge. They weren't able to help us as much as they could've.

It appeared to the student participants that, to the school district, being Hmong was all that was required in order to be a productive paraprofessional. In other words, the school district assumed that Hmong American students' needs would best be met through an almost biological transmission of home culture from minimally trained paraprofessionals, rather than in rigorously trained educational professionals skilled in culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000). This is not to blame the Hmong American paraprofessionals so much as to critique the school district's policies of professional development for those paraprofessionals. Not coincidentally, the school district's reliance on a "Model Minority" sources of educational success serves to save them a great deal of money while placing responsibility for Hmong American student achievement upon Hmong American families and student adherence to traditional Hmong cultural values.

One of the students, Blia, is a former interpreter for the La Crosse school district. In addition to Kou's comments about paraprofessionals, she added:

> It's almost as if like their whole purpose is just to interpret and that's it. Not to understand the curriculum, the academics within the school system. And, like, I worked for the school district before as a teacher's aide and, umm, I had older teacher's aides that worked for the school district, but that's all they could do. They were very limited in what their knowledge was of, umm, their profession. Like it was just there to interpret, to make phone calls, and just to keep, you know, the parents aware of what was going on in the school. If you're child's misbehaving or we're going to give a test to your child, but that was pretty much it....They can only do so much, and they can't, I don't think they can reach out to, to, especially high school students to connect at all.

Blia is incredibly angry about her experiences as a school district interpreter. She feels that the school in which she worked deliberately kept Hmong American parents uninformed about their children's educations, and simply paid lip service to parent involvement by perfunctory phone calls home and occasional permission slips written in English. As she explains, the school district provided equal access to Hmong American parents - that is, the same forms of access as those provided to non-Hmong parents. However, other than having some part-time interpreters, there was not a strong effort to welcome and include Hmong

American parents or to actively affirm their rights to control over their child's education. She remembers that parents would often sign important papers regarding their children, not knowing what the papers were for, because the school sent them home and said to sign it:

...like when I was working for the school district, there were like tons of permission slips that would come back and forth, and most of the time, it's like, "Mom, sign it." "Okay -what is it?" "Oh, it's just a letter. Just sign it." Okay, I sign it, you know. At the end, it's like, oh, "your son or daughter is failing science or whatever and we're thinking about testing him because he might have a learning disability" or...usually stuff like that. They would call and, or sign a release form, and so the interpreter would call and get a verbal confirmation or whatnot, but it's like, you know, it could be like an emergency that you fill it out, we're going on a field trip, you know. And they're like, "Oh, I don't know what this is." "Oh, just sign it. Just sign it." I mean, and most of the time, I mean, my duties are to interpret, and most of the time, I'm like "Oh, did you know this is so-and-so?" And then the mom's like, "Oh, I didn't know. My son or daughter just brought it to me and, I don't know anything. I don't know any better. So I just sign it." And it's like, for God's sake, let the parents know what the hell's going on at school, because what if it's, what if it's like a life or death situation, you know? And it's, it's...oh, I could go on and on about this.....

The students explained that one of the reasons why parents put so much trust in school goes back to their prior experiences in Laos, where education was so difficult to obtain that those who became teachers commanded great respect:

(Kou) It seems like, because they don't know, they put a lot of trust in the school and the teacher to take care of their kids, make sure the kid gets through.

(Blia) And they're also intimidated because, well, the teacher is the authority figure, so...

(Pa) ...It's that big respect that the Hmong culture has for Hmong teachers, because in Laos, you know, it goes back to Laos again, there's not a lot of teachers, and when you become a teacher, wow, you know, you're something big....Like my dad used to say, you know, your parents are your main educators, and then your teachers, you know, and those are the people that will educate you through life, you know...And then, especially when the parents aren't, you know, they aren't educated in that way, then the kids come home and just go "Oh, and this and this" and they go, "Okay, if your teacher said so, I guess it's a good thing" but really not having no idea.

(Kou) And typically, because of that deep sense of respect, they usually don't blame the teachers when you're failing. It's more like, on them [students]....

The students also critique their parents' involvement, but they make it complicated. The Hmong American students sometimes feel extraordinary pressure to succeed in school and to fulfill their familial obligations, all while remaining rooted in traditional Hmong culture. They felt that often their parents simply demanded good school performance without assisting their children in achieving these goals. However, the students knew that their parents were working long hours, did not have a great deal of financial resources, did not have much experience with American educational institutions, and often had little formal education themselves. What their parents were able to do, however, was to work hard to instill in their children the values they felt would best enable them to be successful (Lopez, 2001). Therefore, the students' critiques were tempered by an acknowledgment of their parents' intentions and of the constrained contexts in which their parents operated. And the students, furthermore, did not question their parents' commitment to their educational success:

(Pa) I think every Hmong family values their kid to get an education. That's why they, the elders especially, they, you know – not elders, like middle-aged people – despise kids that skip school. 'Cause they automatically think that's the gangster, gangbanging kid, and they despise those kids, you know, and once their kids start dressing like that or once they found that their kid has skipped one day of class, they'll get really mad. "Oh, are you becoming a gangster? Are you being a bad kid now?" They despise that. They want, like, every single Hmong parent wants their kid to become a doctor or a lawyer. That's their dream…And, and that they set that up for the kids, but at the same time they don't understand that their kids, sometimes that's not what they want and that's what causes their kids to like, "You know, I'm not getting an A in school, and my parents think that I should get an A and I'm getting a C, but a C's not good enough for them, so screw my parents. Screw school. I'll just do whatever I want." You know?

(Blia)… So there's not a lot of support. It's…and I think the reason is because I think not a lot of parents understand, like, the whole school system. I mean, that's how they know, I mean, some of them didn't have an education, that's how they know that grades are all defined by getting A's, straight A's, or getting that 4.0 or joining sports and play basketball.

Pa uses her father's educational experiences in order to explain the attitudes of her parents' generation towards their children in school:

Like a lot of our parents never, they never went to school, you know, and I mean my dad went to school, but for them, you had, your parents had money to pay for you to go to school and to get

an education. So they value education so much because they know how hard their parents had to struggle to get them into school. You know, my dad knew how hard it was, you know. I mean, they were so poor they didn't have papers to write on, so then he would like go carve a piece of wood and then just write dirt on there in order to save paper. And he used paper for like the real good stuff, you know, to write out like the Laotian alphabet on there, and he'll copy it on dirt. That's how he practiced writing the alphabet and how to write and stuff, you know? And so he valued, I mean, our parents value education. They go to school and the school system is really strict, you know. You learn and if you don't learn, the teachers will whip you. You know, they'll....you know, the teachers will whip you, and then if you don't learn fast enough at the pace that they're going, they'll still whip you. But then here, it's like, teachers are like, they're just there to teach, and they use a different approach. And I think, umm, our parents don't understand us, because they're going, "hey – education is free. You go to school, you have pencils, you have pens." And that's all that they wanted in Laos. And now here, we have all of that, except the kids are still struggling and they, you know, they don't understand why the kids are struggling. They're just like, "why aren't you learning? You have, this, you know, education is free. You know, everything is free. Why aren't you, you know, learning?" And then, they don't understand, like, the problems that the kids are having at the same time, too. They only understand, "oh my gosh, I struggled so hard to learn some stuff. And now my kid has all this – all this is free. He has it so simple. He or she has it so simple, but yet he's failing in school. What the hell is wrong with my kid? Oh, my kid is just stupid. He's just a gangster kid, he's just doing drugs. He's no good. So I'm giving up hope."

These students grapple with all the representations of themselves, trying to forge positive and affirming identities by incorporating and claiming all aspects of themselves. Their parents, while working hard to support their educational achievement, also sometimes undermine their own support because of their fear that their children will lose their Hmong culture. Their teachers often do not know anything meaningful about Hmong culture or history, and work to assimilate Hmong American students into mainstream white American culture while periodically inserting shallow representations of Hmong culture during diversity week. Their Hmong American peers incorporate a range of coping mechanisms, from denying their Hmong cultural ties to completely rejecting school culture in favor of their own psychological preservation. Many of the participants indicated that it was a struggle to stay in school, although the women seemed less likely to seriously consider dropping out than the male participant. However, since there was only one male participant, this is not conclusive. But what Kou says about how he felt when he skipped is telling of how much pressure he felt at school:

It was, it felt like - refreshing, skipping. 'Cause you have friends who are going through the same thing, and when you leave that place, you leave the school ground and, you know, you call in sick or whatever, and you leave the school, it feels so refreshing to be away from all that other stuff. You don't have to deal with the academia stuff, like the schoolwork and the stress - because you don't understand it in the first place and there's no one to help you – and you don't have to deal with the students picking on you or making fun of you because you can't speak English as good or for whatever reason. You know, it just feels so refreshing…and I was fortunate that, you know, *I didn't, I wasn't like that* until I was a senior, you know, and but the thing was, I've always listened to my dad, and once my dad found out, he got on me and I was able to change…But some of those other students that went through these issues earlier on and they didn't have people to turn to when they were freshman, sophomore, a lot of them don't make it. You know, a lot of those ones that are going through issues, they don't make it. Because once they get out of school and they start skipping and they see how refreshing it is, and, you know, how they don't have to deal with all these other stuff, they don't want to go back. 'Cause I didn't want to go back.

Maneuvering the borders of race, culture, class, and citizenship left these students feeling confused and often alone. Current literature does not really create a place for them either, since discussions of the "Model Minority" or "juvenile delinquent" stereotypes leave out Asian American students who do not get into trouble but who also are not the subjects of high teacher expectations. As Hmong Americans constantly enmeshed in a process of American subject making, they are negotiating ways in which to affirm themselves and their families while challenging white supremacist institutional practices for the sake of their younger siblings and cousins, who must still attend the same schools that the participants did. In the wake of September 11th, being positioned as "foreign" has also meant being positioned as the enemy. For these Hmong American students, who are alternately named foreign and a model for other American minorities, such absolutism is the border they balance upon, the razor-sharp hyphen between Hmong and American they are struggling to define.

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